

L2 willingness to communicate (WTC) and international posture in the Polish educational context

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Abstract

Speaking, the language skill whose mastering appears to be the ultimate aim of every attempt at learning a foreign language, constitutes a formidable challenge. Apart from involving the online interaction of complex processes of conceptualization, formulation, articulation and monitoring (Levelt, 1989), it appears prone to numerous psychological and social influences that, being difficult to control, may consistently hinder development. One of such factors, closely related to the concept of anxiety, is L2 willingness to communicate (WTC), called “the most immediate determinant of L2 use” (Clement, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003, p. 191). Perceived as either a personality trait or/and a context-related feature, WTC seems capable of accounting for a person’s first and second language communication. Interestingly it can be related to the learner’s disposition towards the target language culture, general interest in international affairs, willingness to travel and sustain contacts with speakers of other languages, which, defined as international posture (Yashima, 2002), serves as a strong predictor of success in language learning. The present paper reports the results of a survey conducted among 111 students of English, in the majority prospect teachers of English. The aim was to establish the degree of correlation between their interna-

tional posture and WTC. The results do not corroborate the outcomes of other studies performed in the field (cf. Yashima, 2002, 2009), which might point to the unique characteristics of the Polish educational context.

Keywords: communication, speaking, international posture, willingness to communicate, motivation

Learning to communicate in a second/foreign language appears to be a very challenging process whose course depends, on the one hand, on the context in which it takes place and, on the other, on individual characteristics of the learner. While the acquisition of one's mother tongue to a degree that facilitates social interaction is, with very few exceptions, a common phenomenon, learning a second language to achieve native-like performance turns out to be much more infrequent. Mastering a L2 largely depends on a number of affective variables such as motivation, attitudes and learning anxiety. The list of factors behind the outcomes of the learning process has recently been amended with a concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) that seems to be a powerful predictor of success (cf. Yashima, 2002). The significance of the concept hinges on the fact that it integrates psychological, linguistic, educational, and communicative dimensions of language that traditionally have been investigated separately (MacIntyre, Burns, & Jessome, 2011). Moreover, it captures integrative and instrumental aspects of motivation and appears to be particularly useful in explaining how learners in contexts lacking meaningful direct contact with target language speakers manage to relate to a L2 community. Many contemporary approaches to second language pedagogy view the development of learners' communicative competence as their central objective especially in view of the fact that communicating in the target language is an indispensable condition for language acquisition to take place (Savignon, 2005). According to Swain (1985), producing output may play many important functions in language development, such as promoting noticing, testing hypotheses or reflecting on the language produced. Consequently, the claim that stimulation of learners' L2 willingness to communicate ought to become the purpose of language learning programmes (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998) turns out to be the most convincing for language learners and teachers. Communicating in the target language, both the tool and goal of instruction, proves to be unique in character since language learners undertake an attempt to express their thoughts knowing that the skill they apply is probably deficient (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011, p. 149). On the other hand, being unwilling to communicate may adversely affect not only the course of the learning process but also the way in which a person is evaluated by others, especially at school or at work. A better understanding of the motives underlying learners' readiness to

engage in communication or reluctance to do so may contribute to developing classroom conditions conducive to communication and assist language learners in exploiting their full potential. Being able to control situational variables in order to create learners' L2 WTC appears to constitute an appealing perspective for teachers and educators (cf. Kang, 2005).

The research question the study delineated in the present chapter has attempted to address is whether willingness to communicate in English among Polish students is related to their international posture (IP). The conceptualization of the construct of international posture as an amalgam of integrative and instrumental motives applied in the present study was developed and investigated by Yashima (2002, 2009). The present study, conducted by the authors among university students of English has not offered conclusive results. Language learners' WTC has turned out to be a complex phenomenon, the analysis of which should involve considering a multitude of factors. Moreover, following the analysis of the results accrued in the study delineated below, some doubts have arisen with reference to the tool applied here to collect data concerning the concept of international posture which appears to be insufficient to tap the motivations and tendencies among learners of English in Poland.

Origin and Definitions of WTC

Before communication is commenced numerous psychological processes need to be initiated in the mind of the speaker. The analysis and consideration of such mechanisms as *unwillingness to communicate* (Burgoon, 1976), *predisposition towards verbal behavior* (Mortensen, Arntson, & Lustig, 1977) and *shyness* (McCroskey & Richmond, 1982) led to the creation of the concept of WTC, initially investigated with reference to the speaker's mother tongue, later to a L2 and L3. At the onset of WTC studies the concept was defined as a tendency to engage in communication when free to do so (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987, 1990) and perceived as an individual characteristic, a personality trait that is stable irrespective of the context and participants. WTC was hypothesized to derive from two variables: lack of anxiety and perceived competence (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990), thus it was assumed that people who feel confident and perceive themselves as effective communicators are willing to communicate. Empirical evidence supporting the theoretical conceptualization of WTC was provided by MacIntyre (1994) who developed a path model according to which WTC stems from a combination of perceived communication competence and communication anxiety. Within the model, the impact of communication anxiety on the perception of competence was also recognized.

A data collection instrument that was created as a consequence of the development of the theoretical framework (McCroskey & Baer, 1985) has been applied in many research projects (cf. Chan & McCroskey, 1987; McCroskey, 1992; McCroskey & Richmond, 1982; Zakahi & McCroskey, 1989). In the early days of WTC studies researchers were particularly concerned with comparisons of L1 WTC across various nationalities, and thus numerous surveys were carried out among Puerto Rican (McCroskey, Fayer, & Richmond, 1985), Australian, Micronesian, Swedish and USA (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990) as well as Finnish students (Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1991). The outcomes of the investigations confirmed the existence of significant differences between countries and cultures.

Many factors shape one's WTC: the number of participants in communication, the degree of intimacy, the level of formality, the topic of discussion, among others, but none of these has a stronger impact than the language of discourse. The change of the language of communication immediately affects most of the factors leading to a persons' willingness to engage in and sustain communication. According to MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 546), L2 WTC is a complex phenomenon that cannot be understood as "a simple manifestation of WTC in the L1". The analysis of L2 WTC was first undertaken by MacIntyre and Charos (1996) who applied an amalgam of MacIntyre's (1994) framework and the socio-educational model by Gardner (1985). The results of the research conducted among English L2 learners of French indicated that a high level of motivation leads to a more frequent use of the target language. The corollary of the study was the realization that not only anxiety and perceived competence were determinants of WTC but equally prominent were personality traits and the social context. It transpired that linguistic, social, cognitive and emotional systems come into play to produce L2 WTC. Extending the study of WTC to L2 communication necessitated a change of the perspective on the construct that could no longer be viewed as stable, trait-like, but rather a consequence of the interplay of situational factors, inter-group tendencies and competence. Thus, it became evident that in order to understand the processes leading to L2 communication numerous enduring and situational variables need to be analyzed and verified. As a result, MacIntyre et al. (1998) conceptualized L2 WTC as a six-layered pyramid model that encapsulates proximal and distal influences leading to a communicative event. Starting from the bottom, the most basic layer, layer six, represents intergroup climate and the learner's personality, the two features the learner has little control of. Layer five comprises the affective and cognitive context of an individual including attitudes towards the target group, the social situation and communicative competence. The last of the layers representing enduring influences consists of motivational propensities including

interpersonal and intergroup motivation and self-confidence. The first type of motives, deriving from social roles played by an individual within a group, is connected with the need for affiliation and control that could be associated with integrativeness and instrumentality respectively within Gardner's socio-educational model. The former rests on physical closeness and appeal, similarity and frequency of encounters. The latter is to be exercised over the cognitive, emotional and behavioural domains of the interlocutor (MacIntyre et al., 1998, pp. 550-551). L2 self-confidence is again composed of two aspects: the first corresponds to the speaker's evaluation of the achieved L2 proficiency, the second refers to the sphere of affect and denotes language anxiety endured while using the target language.

The next three layers of the pyramid take into account situational variables. And thus, layer three, situated antecedents of communication, is hypothesized to include two main groups of factors: desire to communicate with a specific person and state communicative self-confidence. Being the outcome of the interplay of individual and intergroup motivational tendencies belonging to layer four, the first of the factors involves both affiliation and control propensities. State communicative self-confidence caters for the speaker's own perceptions concerning the ability to communicate at a particular moment. A satisfactory level of proficiency may increase the communicator's WTC, while increased anxiety will adversely affect it (MacIntyre, 2003). Layer two is willingness to communicate but its conceptualization differs from that of McCroskey & Baer (1985) since its situational dimension has been recognized and taken into account. Here, WTC is defined as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a particular person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). What needs to be noted, however, is that WTC does not represent actual communication but rather a behavioural intention to speak that the learner may implement if an opportunity arises (MacIntyre, 2007). Layer one, the pinnacle of the pyramid, is actual communication comprising not only overt verbal action but also reading L2 newspapers, watching television, using L2 in a workplace. MacIntyre et al. (1998, p. 547), while emphasizing the role of communication in the course of language acquisition, point to the responsibilities of the teacher saying that:

(...) the ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them. A programme that fails to produce students who are willing to use the language is simply a failed programme.

International Posture

The pyramid model encapsulates motivation and attitudes as conceived under the social psychological approach (Gardner, 1985), according to which learners' motivation to learn a L2 rests on their desire to identify or even integrate with the target language community. In Gardner's Socio-Educational Model of Second Language Acquisition (Gardner, 1985) integrative motivation is a composite construct consisting of three main subcomponents: integrativeness, attitudes towards the learning situation and motivation, the last of which includes effort, desire and affect and functions as the "motivational engine" that can be triggered by a specific learning goal, for example, an integrative orientation. L2 WTC research resting on the premises of Gardner's model reported significant correlations between L2 WTC and attitudes and motivation (Baker & MacIntyre, 2000; MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, & Donovan, 2002).

Following the growing dissatisfaction with the notion of integrative motivation and critical appraisal of the social psychological model, a need arose to seek for a construct that would better account for the motivational aspects capable of making learners undertake effort to learn (for a detailed discussion see Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pietrzykowska in press). One of such attempts was undertaken by Yashima (2000) who employed the concept of *international posture* (IP) in her research conducted among Japanese learners of English. Trying to establish the most significant factors resulting in learning behaviour, Yashima (2000) established that a factor she labelled "intercultural friendship orientation" together with instrumental orientation were preconditions for motivational intensity to learn, which, in turn, led to higher proficiency levels. In another study, Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) demonstrated that Japanese learners of English were mostly inspired by two motives: satisfying their immediate goals such as academic achievement and being connected to the international community. Learners may be driven by both motives at a varying degree; however, Yashima (2002) chose to concentrate on, what she called *international posture* that was to replace integrativeness. The construct can be defined as "openness and favourable disposition towards other languages and cultures, interest in foreign affairs and non-ethnocentric outlook on life" (Yashima, 2002, p. 57). The concept comprises, among other things, interest in foreign international affairs, willingness to work or study abroad and a readiness to interact with people from other countries. For the purpose of empirical investigations, Yashima et al. (2004) operationalized IP to include the following components:

1. Intergroup approach tendency e.g., I wouldn't mind sharing an apartment or a room with international students.

2. Interest in international vocation and activities e.g., I'd rather avoid the kind of work that sends me overseas frequently.
3. Interest in foreign affairs e.g., I often read and watch news about foreign countries (Yashima, 2009, p. 146).

The original conceptualization was supplemented with the category "having things to communicate to the world" (Yashima, 2009, p. 155) in response to the participants' comments that brought the researcher's attention to the fact that the urge to enter communication needs to be preceded by actually having opinions and ideas to share with others. As can be seen, the concept of international posture captures integrative and instrumental aspects of motivation and offers the possibility to account for the way learners in contexts where meaningful direct contact with native speakers is unlikely or scarce manage to relate to an L2 community. In the Polish as well as in the Japanese educational context, regular contacts with native speakers of English are highly limited, and thus, the attitude towards English-speaking cultures is most likely to be shaped by the media and education (Yashima et al., 2004, p. 124). Moreover, Japanese students and, it may be hypothesized that Polish ones as well, perceive English as a means of communication with other non-English cultures.

Yashima and associates (Yashima et al., 2004, pp. 141-142) performed Structural Equation Modeling to identify antecedents and results of WTC in L2, in the course of which they established that WTC predicts both frequency and amount of communication. Learners with a higher level of WTC generally tended to engage in communication more frequently and for a longer period of time. Correlational analyses indicated that perceived communication competence is most significantly related to WTC. Positive perceptions of one's competence generate eagerness to use the target language in communication. Moreover, learners who displayed a higher level of international posture – interested in foreign affairs, willing to work or study overseas – appeared to engage in L2 communication more frequently and seemed to be motivated to study the L2. On the basis of numerous empirical studies Yashima (2002, 2009; Yashima et al., 2004) has postulated a model in which international posture, willingness to communicate, a factor that leads to increased frequency of communication, together with English proficiency engage with one another, promoting mutual growth (for a schematic representation of the model see Yashima, 2009, p. 154).

The Study

A questionnaire-based study was conducted with a view to establishing whether the concepts of willingness to communicate (WTC) and international posture (IP) are interrelated. The questionnaire aimed to collect information

concerning the degree to which the statements included in the data collection instruments reflected the perceptions held by the participants.

Participants

The study was conducted among first and second year students at a University and a State School of Higher Professional Education in Poland attending a three-year BA program. The sample consisted of 111 students, 95 of whom were female and 16 male. They were intermediate and upper-intermediate learners of English, representing the B1 and B2 levels in accordance with the *Common European Framework for Reference for Languages*. It seems justifiable to say that most of the learners had substantial experience in learning foreign languages and attended a regular practical English course, comprising pronunciation, grammar, speaking, writing and integrated skills classes. What needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that most of the students intend to enter the teaching profession where using spoken language is part and parcel of every-day responsibilities including initiating discussions, making lectures, explaining and presenting material, organizing activities etc., thus it may be assumed that their overall level of WTC should be high.

Instrumentation

The study, being correlational in nature, required collecting information denoting the participants' international posture (IP) and their willingness to communicate in the target language. This was done by means of the IP scale devised by Yashima (2002, 2009) and L2 WTC questionnaire Ryan (2009) applied in the study conducted among Japanese learners of English. The tool, in turn, was based on the instruments used by Csizér and Dörnyei (2005), Dörnyei and Clément (2001), Dörnyei and Csizér (2002), Dörnyei, Csizér, and Németh (2006) in the longitudinal study involving a large sample of Hungarian teenagers whose motivational propensities were investigated with a view to establishing a uniform model that would account for motivated learning behavior in the EFL context. The IP data collection instrument comprises twenty questions divided into four categories. The first, labeled as Intergroup Approach includes items as: "I try to avoid talking with foreigners if I can", the second, Interest in International Vocation or Activities, contains statements like: "I want to work in an international organization or an international company". The next component comprises items that express curiosity and knowledge concerning international news, for example: "I often talk about situations and events in foreign countries with my family and/or friends". Yashima

(2009) supplemented the above set with the fourth component, Having Things to Communicate to the World, which emerged as pertinent when the IP scale was used to studies on content-based teaching to establish if a learner has things to say to the international community as expressed by the statement: "I have ideas about international issues, such as environmental issues and north-south issues". The respondents were required to indicate their answers on a five-point Likert scale demonstrating the degree to which a particular statement applied to them (from 1 – *very strongly* to 5 – *not at all*), whereas the analysis involved calculating the means for each subscale and the whole instrument with the important caveat that the negative items needed to be key-reversed. The participants' L2 WTC has been established on the basis of the responses tapped by means of a questionnaire consisting of eight 5-point Likert scale items; however, this time respondents had to indicate their answers in terms of frequency (from 1 – *very often* to 5 – *never*) and the analysis involved tabulating the score for the whole scale. The statistical procedures employed here entailed calculating Pearson's correlation coefficients to establish the nature of the relationships between the variables under investigation.

Data Analysis and Results

As expected, the respondents' willingness to communicate did not reach a high level at 2.49. As far as the link between the level of overall international posture and L2 willingness to communicate is concerned, it is evident from Table 1 that it is positive and very weak ($r = 0.098$), and statistically insignificant. The two data sets overlap about 1% only. A similar tendency can be observed when correlation coefficients are tabulated separately for each of the four subscales of international posture. The relationship between the first one (IP1), Intergroup Approach, a component related to making friends with international students eagerly, helping foreigners living in the surrounding community, and willingness to share a flat or a room with a student from abroad turned out to be stronger than in the case of IP in general, but it is still rather low ($r = 0.19$). As can be seen in Table 1, Pearson's correlation coefficient indicates that there is a 4% overlap between the two data sets. Surprisingly, international posture that can be associated with eagerness to work abroad, to work for an international company and pursuing an international career, labeled as Interest in International Vocation and Activities (IP2), correlates negatively with willingness to speak. Nevertheless, the correlation is low ($r = -0.12$), which means that it accounts for the tendency in 1.4% only. A very weak, positive relationship ($r = 0.09$, data do not overlap even 1%) was found between willingness to communicate and international posture operationalized as

watching and reading news about foreign countries, discussing events which have taken place abroad, Interest in International News (IP3). As shown in Table 1, even a lower correlation exists between the participants' willingness to communicate and IP4, Having Things to Communicate to the World, that is indicative of the respondents willingness to share thoughts with people from other parts of the world and having issues, for example, environmental ones, to address in the world ($r = 0.06$, data overlap 0.3% only).

Table 1 Correlations between L2 WTC and the levels of IP in general and individual components (* indicates statistical significance at the .05 level)

N = 111	WTC	IP	IP1	IP2	IP3	IP4
Mean	2.49	3.00	3.04	3.04	2.84	3.08
Correlation coefficient		0.098	0.19*	-0.12	0.09	0.06

The analysis of the data accrued in the study showed that international posture and willingness to communicate are not related to a high degree in the Polish educational context. Although such findings indicate that the concept of international posture does not have a bearing on learners' willingness to communicate, this conclusion might be premature in view of the fact that students in Poland do not have a frequent opportunity to meet foreigners and engage in genuine communication. Talking to a Polish friend in English when standing in a queue or when having a discussion in a group of Poles, seems artificial and highly unlikely. On the other hand, it cannot be excluded that the respondents tried to convey a more favorable picture of themselves than the real one, which is often the case in this type of research. Moreover, another weakness of the study may lie in the fact that the sample the analysis concerned is relatively small and consists of learners who are unique in character: it could be expected that students of the English Department, the majority of whom are likely to become teachers or translators, must be driven by instrumental motives connected with their future careers rather than curiosity, openness or positive disposition towards the international community. As far as the link between WTC and IP1, which is a reflection of the intergroup approach, is concerned, it is relatively low; however, the correlation coefficient is the highest of all in the study, probably because most of the situations described in the statements (sharing a room with a foreign student, helping foreigners) do not always require communicating in the target language. A student might feel comfortable if foreigners moved next door, but this does not mean that he or she would be willing to talk to the new neighbors. One more

aspect deserves mentioning here, namely the instrument applied in the survey assumes that all nationalities and cultures will result in the same type of attitude, which may not be the case: while sharing a flat with one nationality may be pleasant and welcome, sharing it with another may be undesirable and cause unfavorable reactions. Much in the same vein, learning one foreign language may trigger positive reactions which would not be observed in the case of another. In addition, the study showed that a desire to work abroad and pursue an international career (IP2) is not in sync with being eager to talk in English. In fact, the higher this desire is, the lower the level of willingness to communicate. It may be speculated here that students preparing for the teaching profession do not envisage themselves teaching English anywhere else but Poland. Thus, their didactic and pedagogic skills appear to play a more profound role than communicating with native and nonnative speakers of the target language on international issues. Interest in international affairs represented in the research project by IP3 did not translate into eagerness to talk in English. Being up-to-date with the latest news from abroad does not necessarily imply that the information has been derived from English-language sources, neither does it presuppose discussing the issues in English.

Most controversy surrounds the last of the IP subscales, Having Things to Communicate to the World, that comprises such statements as “I have ideas about international issues, such as environmental issues and north-south issues” or “I have issues to address with people in the world”. Many of the participants asked about the meaning of the phrase “north-south issues” not actually knowing that the phrase refers to the North-South Divide – the socio-economic and political division between the wealthy developed countries of the North and poorer developing countries of the South. The second of the items provoked numerous discussions with respondents inquiring about the nature of the issues to be conveyed to the world suspecting the researcher enquired about global political problems or religious matters. Doubts and inquiries expressed by the participants with reference to IP4 brought about the realization that probably limiting the scope of the “things to communicate to the world” to the issues mentioned in the questionnaire may have falsified the picture. Being the respondents’ regular teacher the present author knows how active they are on various internet fora exchanging opinions about music, sport, fashion or playing internet games where English is the primary tool for communication. Hence, it seems justifiable to say that choosing of a more appealing agenda might have resulted in a completely different score for this subcomponent of international posture.

Conclusions, Implications and Directions for Future Research

Although the evidence provided by the study described in the present paper casts doubt on the existence of the relationship between learners' willingness to communicate and their international posture, there still are grounds to believe that these two important variables influence one another. The results accrued in the course of a questionnaire-based study, in contrast with the previously accumulated research (cf. Yashima 2000, 2002, 2004, 2009; Yashima et al. 2004.), did not corroborate the claim that positive disposition towards other countries and cultures, aspirations to travel or work abroad or interest in international affairs necessarily lead to increased frequency of contacts with speakers of the target language, no matter whether native or not. Weak correlations calculated between the factors, only one of which turned out to be statistically significant, account for willingness to communicate in a limited range. Nevertheless, a question arises whether the data collection instrument applied in the present study was suitable to tap the variables properly. This is because the respondents inquired about a number of formulations used in the questionnaires implying the existence of a discrepancy between the conceptualizations of international posture included in the tool and the issues young adults find appealing and exciting about the present-day world. It may only be inferred that if adolescent learners were confronted with the same questionnaire, it would appear even more alien to them, deeming it impossible to measure the construct. This points to the necessity to carefully consider the items that a data collection instrument comprises and adapt them to the requirements of a particular educational context but also account for the flow of time and inevitable changes it brings about. The rapid growth of communication technology offers abundant opportunities for language learners to engage in numerous forms of learning using internet communicators, fora, chats, e-learning platforms etc. to establish private and institutional bonds with the English-speaking community. Unfortunately, neither of these options has been taken into account in the IP questionnaire employed in the study described here. Developing a new instrument and comparing the results with those collected by means of Yashima's IP scale could shed light on the applicability and validity of the tool.

Much in the same vein is the criticism that can be leveled at some of the items included in the scale used to measure respondents' willingness to engage in or initiate communication in English. Some of the options, as those concerning speaking English to Poles standing in a queue, may be considered strange, artificial and highly unlikely. That is why it appears warranted to say that the WTC scale also requires verification and tailoring to the specificity of

the Polish context where taking typical ways of behavior, initiating and sustaining communication by this group of learners would be taken into account.

The study reported above constitutes one of the first attempts to analyze the relationship between L2 willingness to communicate and international posture in the Polish context, and as such, it suffers from a number of important weaknesses. First and foremost, its correlational nature precludes making claims about causality. As elaborated above, the use of instruments which might have been suitable when applied in different circumstances, most likely failed to tap the variables in question in the context the present study was conducted. Moreover, triangulation of the information and especially the inclusion of qualitative data could have resulted in a deeper analysis and more informative insights. The questionnaire survey provided only part of the picture, insightful but not free from weaknesses, since the data were gathered from the participants' self-reports. Data collected in this way predict a tendency to communicate, whereas interviews or classroom observations could accentuate actual behavior and the impact of various contextual factors on the decision to engage in interaction with other learners or the teacher. A contextualized account of Polish students' WTC could emerge if data were obtained from other sources.

All of this clearly shows that further research in this area is needed, with studies targeting other groups of learners, developing new, more precise tools of data collection and supplementing quantitative analysis with qualitative methodology. Yet a further field of enquiry opens with the realization that WTC carries all the characteristics of dynamic systems and as such undergoes fluctuations on the moment-to-moment basis. The recently proposed idiodynamic method (MacIntyre & Legatto 2011) that allows for an examination of changes of WTC within one communicative act, offers the promise of gaining insight into the complex nature of on-line decisions taken by language learners while embarking on communication using a language whose mastery has not been completed.

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